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Kids' privacy rule under review

By Corey Murray, Associate Editor, eSchool News

May 31, 2005—The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is asking educators and others to comment on its implementation and subsequent enforcement of the Child Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), the law that requires internet operators to get parental consent before collecting personal information from web surfers under age 13.

COPPA applies to individually identifiable information about a child that is collected online, such as full name, home address, eMail address, telephone number, or any other information that would allow someone to identify or contact the child, according to the FTC. The FTC regulation pertaining to the law also covers other types of information, including hobbies, interests, and information collected through cookies or other online tracking mechanisms--when tied to individually identifiable information.

The FTC is trying to determine whether to retain the rule as is, modify it, or eliminate it altogether and is asking for public comment on current practices for collecting and disclosing children's information; opinions regarding children's ability to access information online; and the operation of web sites that specifically target children.

The announcement comes because many web sites have been slow to meet COPPA's guidelines--and schools continue to question what justifies legal consent under the law.

The review is part of an FTC procedure that requires the agency to reevaluate the rule five years after its initial implementation. The commission says it plans to share the comments it receives with members of Congress in efforts to reform the law.

Since its inception in 2000, COPPA reportedly has created headaches for online content providers seeking to collect children's personal information for marketing and other purposes. The rule also has created some confusion in schools, where administrators have questioned what authority educational institutions have to grant permission for accessing online content when students are in their care.

To address these challenges, some of the nation's largest online content providers have developed tools intended to streamline the compliance process.

Some services, including Kids Passport from Microsoft Corp., try to collect personal information in a way that allows parents to manage their child's online portfolio from one centralized location.

An extension of Microsoft's "Passport" technology, Kids Passport is an online service that lets users create a single profile--including user name, password, and other information--that can be used on all participating web sites. Rather than complete hundreds of individual registrations, kids use Passport to log on to any number of sites without constantly having to repeat the registration process.

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When a child tries to sign on to a web site that requires personally identifying information, the child can ask a parent or guardian for permission by sending an electronic request through Kids Passport. The parent or guardian reviews the request and can grant a specific level of consent or can deny consent altogether.

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